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ABSTRACT

Because teachers are usually the first to observe that a student may have a learning problem, it is often their job to suggest to parents that an outside professional evaluation of their child be considered. This is particularly true for teachers in private and parochial schools, because the typical public school support staff is usually not available. This paper provides an approach to a parent-teacher conference that can enable educators to help parents acquire a realistic, yet optimistic, view of what can and should be done for their child. Five guidelines are presented: (1) keep the setting as relaxed as possible; (2) let the parents speak first; (3) keep the purpose of the meeting focused and do not overstep professional boundaries; (4) be prepared with data to back up suspicions; and (5) be aware of the parents' emotions and feelings in response to the information given. Emphasis is placed on the conference as part of a process. The parents may resist the notion that their son or daughter has a learning disability and the teacher is reminded that the task of convincing them may take some time. (VW)

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The Suspicion of a Learning Disability: A Guide for the Parent-Teacher Conference

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Running Head: THE SUSPICION OF A LEARNING DISABILITY

Abstract

Teachers are usually the first to observe that a student may have a learning problem; consequently it is often their job to suggest to parents that an outside professional evaluation of their child be considered. For private and parochial school teachers this is particularly true, since the support staff available in a public school is usually not present. In this paper. some potential reactions and coping mechanisms of the parents were discussed, and six guidelines for minimizing conflicts and maximizing communication were presented.

The diagnosis of a learning disorder is usually not made until a child reaches school age (Faerstein,1981). As a consequence, it is frequently left to teachers and other educational professionals to be the first to discuss the possibility of such a condition with the child's parents. Being the bearer of such unhappy tidings is not an easy task, and educators should take into account the coping mechanisms and emotions that come into play when parents are confronted with the issue of their child's disability.

While teachers are not equipped to diagnose a learning disability as such, their observations of a child's behavior and academic progress (or lack of it) are of enormous importance in determining whether a child should be tested, and alerting the parents that a problem may exist. The teacher's role in this case is to provide parents with precise, easily understandable information concerning the child's skill levels (Rutherford & Edgar, 1979).

When a teacher has exhausted all the available options for helping a student learn, and has still encountered failure after failure, the time comes where it must be suggested to the child's parent or parents that an evaluation outside the school should be made. This is especially true in parochial and private schools that do not have the support staff that is part of a public school setting.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss an approach to a parent-teacher conference that will enable educators to more effectively help parents acquire a realistic, yet optimistic, view of can what and should be done for their child. It presents several guidelines that teachers can follow in gently recommending that a student be tested by qualified professional.

It is reasonable to assume that by the time a parent teacher conference has been scheduled to discuss a possible learning disability, the parent has sensed for awhile that something is amiss, although it has remained unspoken. Faerstein (1986) contends that pre-diagnosis is the most likely time for the defense mechanism of denial to have developed. Given the nature of many LDs, this is not surprising. Unlike a Downs Syndrome child, for example, there are no physical signs of abnormality. In everyday situations, their son or daughter apparently functions normally. The child may have even demonstrated academic ability in some areas, leading the parents to believe that more "effort" will improve the child's grade in other areas. (Marion, 1981). At previous parent-teacher conferences, they may have attributed any lack of achievement to laziness or uncooperativeness, because these characteristics, although undesirable, are controllable.

It is important for the teacher to keep these dynamics

in mind when preparing for the meeting. The following guidelines be helpful in facilitating a productive conference. It is presumed here that you have, over the course of some time, spoken with the parents before, and that alternative courses of action have been discussed with them, attempted, but have been met with no success.

1. Keep the setting as relaxed as possible.

From the very start, every effort should be made to make the parents feel comfortable. Since parents often see teachers in an adversarial role (Sonnenchein, 1981), avoid sitting behind your desk with the parents facing you opposite, since this gives the impression of an interview rather than a discussion. A better milieu would be the school library or lounge, if it is available, where you are seated on more equal terms.

2. Let the parents speak first.

Michaelis (1981) stresses the need to convey the message that you, the teacher, value their opinion. They have after all, been the principal observers of the child since birth, and may even confirm beforehand your analysis of the child's behavior and/or academic performance. Beginning with a statement such as "I know that we have all been concerned about Bobby's lack of progress in his schoolwork. What problems have you noticed?", demonstates a willingness to listen and accept what they have to say. To

help further explore their concerns, intersperse open-ended questions throughout the discussion (Margolis & Brannigan, 1986).

3. Keep the purpose of the meeting focused and do not overstep your professional boundaries.

Often in publications geared to the general population, educational jargon is used without an adequate explanation, causing a misunderstand of terms. Therefore, the use of technical language is to be avoided (Peary, 1981). Keep in mind that as a teacher, you are not in the position to diagnose, and that the purpose of the meeting is to suggest testing by a qualified specialist. "Labeling" a child without the proper diagnostic procedures would be unfair to the student as well as the parents, and unprofessional on your part.

5. Be prepared with data to back up your suspicions.

At some point the parents may begin to rationalize about the child's behavior, citing examples to discount any inadequacies. To avoid any misunderstandings, and to forestall nonacceptance of your recommendations, Michealis (1981) suggests presenting very concrete, specific evidence of the child's problems, such as examples of schoolwork and dated anecdotal records of unusual behavior. Research the student's academic history, where it is feasible. Previous standardized test scores could be charted and summarized to

demonstrate the basic skill areas where the child has had particular problems over an extended period of time.

Ask yourself the questions, "What methodology has been used to help this child learn? What have other teachers attempted"? Without falling back on technical jargon, explain that, while you and others have done your best, the child's needs are not being satisfied, and stress the need for an evaluation as a means of determining the best possible system of teaching him or her.

6. Be aware of the parents emotions and feelings in response to your information.

To parents, children are an extension of themselves, and a child's disability may be seen as a self-failure (Peary, 1981). Parents may respond with anger over your evaluation of their child. They may blame themselves and feel guilty, or they may project the blame onto the teachers. (Seligman, 1979).

Stereotypic images and fears of the "mentally retarded" may arise, as well as anxieties regarding the permanant labeling of their child and the percieved stigma that results. They may respond with anger towards you at the suggestion that there is something "wrong" with their child. If this occurs, it is important that teachers maintain composure and not react defensively (Margolis & Brannigan 1986). Again, being prepared with objective information is

necessary.

Stress that there is no person or circumstance to blame,and that the "why" of the disorder is not as meaningful as the "how" to overcome the disability as much as possible.

CONCLUSIONS

The teacher should make every effort to make the conference a dialogue rather than a lecture. Keep in mind that evn with your best possible presentation of the material, the parents may still resist the notion that their son or daughter may have a learning disabliity; as it took you time to reach this conclusion, it may take them more. For them, this may not be the right time for objectivity, it is more likely that their emotions are churning. Give them time. As your recommendation was the result of a process, the task of convincing them may be a process also. The first step has been taken, and it may take many more.

Regardless of their reaction, reassure the parents that you will be there to answer questions as they have them, and plan to actively keep them abreast of the student's work and behavior.

The ideal conference does not exist. While differences of opinion, disagreements, and misunderstandings are almost inevitable, a sensitivity to the emotions of all the parties involved, including our own, can minimize any potential conflicts.

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